

# Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

## EVACUEES

### Remembering evacuee life in and around East Grinstead <sup>1</sup>

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by Mrs Eileen Jeffery

We came home that hot late August afternoon in 1939 from school to find our mother had been shopping to buy a suitcase to put our belongings in for our trip to the country. We were the writer, Eileen, 9 years, John 7, Molly 6 and Peter just turned 4. Our father saw us off on the train to East Grinstead with our cardboard gas mask boxes over our shoulders and passed us a whole bar of chocolate (Nestle's) each from the machine on the platform. I knew that something was afoot because he never bought us sweets. Then he kissed our mother goodbye.

After arriving in pitch darkness at East Grinstead we all bundled into a taxi (there being no buses running) and duly arrived at the front door of Shovelstrode Manor which was to be our home for the next seven years.....The butler opened the door to us: a poor bewildered mother, four children and one suitcase.....

I remember that we used to say to the other evacuees from the East End that we were 'private evacuees', different from them, which always started a fight. We came to be at the manor because our mother's sister was lady's maid to Lady Glamis and on the question of evacuees it was decided to have someone they knew. The cook and butler lived at the lodge so had their own nieces stay with them. Four days after our arrival war was declared, so we were to stay there for the duration.....

Our old dad visited us now and again. He was a fire watcher in London and used to get up at the crack of dawn on a Monday to walk four miles to catch his coach to London and would meet several more fathers on the way doing the same thing. Mum always said she couldn't do a thing with us after a visit from him.....

We were told off at school for 'helping Hitler' by sliding down the haystacks so that the rain sank through the thatching and ruined the hay. We would jump on the cows' backs while they were chewing the cud and this upset the milk yield. Mind you, the local children put us up to it. We Londoners were blamed for lots of things. Poor old mum was always bailing us out from all sorts of pranks.....

In our later years Mum found two houses to rent in East Grinstead but father wouldn't let her settle there. Young Valerie aged three cried bitterly to be taken back 'home' to settle down in a dingy third floor council flat. John and I didn't return to London. I joined the Women's Land Army.

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<sup>1</sup> A longer extract from *Remembering wartime in and around East Grinstead* can be found in in course section [On the Home Front - Daily Life](#)